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There's nothing like dying to make you wonder if you made a mistake. Looking over the examples that have been submitted lately, most of them have one thing in common: The player submitting them ended up losing a game that he suspects he need not have lost. It is great that they're looking at what happened and wondering what they could have done differently, but there are two things worth noting before I begin tackling the examples. First, it's not just the last decision that is worth looking at but those before it. These players have managed to get themselves into a pickle, and I'm curious if they had a way to avoid being put to the decisions they now have to make where they generally are not going to have any good (or at least, not going to have any safe) answers. Your fate is not always sealed by your last decision but by the decisions that led to that decision.



The other thing worth noting is that you shouldn't let the outcome of the game determine whether you look back and examine it. Those games where you end up taking these risks but winning anyway are worth looking at as well, but I don't often hear people say 'My play would have lost to a Shock, did I do something wrong?' unless their opponent did in fact have the Shock.

Now, on to the examples:

I was recently playing with my blue deck that largely resembles Randy Buehler's 1998 deck from Worlds against my friend's red burn deck. For reference, here's Randy's deck:

**Randy Buehler**  
 Worlds 1998 

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**Main Deck**  
 60 cards

18 Island 4 Quicksand 4 Stalking Stones <hr/> 26 lands	1 Rainbow Efreet <hr/> 1 creatures	4 Counterspell 4 Dismiss 2 Dissipate 3 Forbid 4 Force Spike 4 Impulse 3 Mana Leak 1 Memory Lapse 4 Nevinyrral's Disk 4 Whispers of the Muse <hr/> 33 other spells
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This is the situation:



**Opponent (13 life)**

*in play:*

- 7 Mountain (4 tapped, 3 untapped)
- 1 Bloodrock Cyclops (tapped)

*in hand:*

- 2 unknown cards

**You (4 life)**

*in play:*

- 5 Island
- 2 Stalking Stones

*in hand:*

- 1 Nevinyrral's Disk
- 1 Force of Will

It's your precombat main phase. How do you evaluate this board position, and what do you do?

Things do not look good. You're down to four life and your opponent is actually ahead of you on cards. At this point in the game decks as controlling as this one (Buehler's deck had the most counterspells and least amount of offense of any competitive deck I can think of) expects to at least have generated some card advantage. Right now your main advantage is your pair of Stalking Stones where your opponent has extra basic lands.

The key piece of information in this example is that your opponent is playing a red burn deck. If your opponent was playing a deck full of red creatures, you could consider plays that brought you down to one life point. Against a burn deck that is suicide. You're turning every burn spell in your opponent's deck into an automatic win, and without even the ability to pitch a card to Force of Will (since that would kill you) you have very little chance to win even if you manage to stabilize. If he can stop you from blocking or can burn you out from four life then you had even less hope.

It might cause you to wince but you have only one play. You must activate the Stalking Stones and attempt to block Bloodrock Cyclops. If he burns the Stalking Stones then you have lost nothing. Most

scenarios where he burns you out were also unwinnable any other way for the reasons described above. You need to take a chance.



That's exactly what the player decided to do, but he started doubting himself after his opponent played an unexpected card.

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Well, I tapped all of my Islands and a Stalking Stones to make my other Stalking Stones a 3/3 artifact creature so that I could trade with the Bloodrock Cyclops. It turns out that my opponent had a Shatter conveniently located in his hand. So, I lost.

Now, my question is, is it smarter to save your Force of Will in this situation to hard cast it if your opponent plays a threat the next turn? But, this will also let the Cyclops swing for three, putting you at one life. So, let's say I save the Force of Will and my opponent tries to play a Goblin Lackey on his next turn. Do I counter the Lackey or save my Force of Will for a possible spell like Lava Axe or Beacon of Destruction? Another possibility is to play my Disk, but is that too slow in this situation?

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That's the thinking of a man who just lost, but suppose you did agree to go down to one life and your opponent tried to cast Goblin Lackey. Would you cast Force of Will?

If you don't counter Goblin Lackey then you're going to have to activate Stalking Stones, untap, activate another Stalking Stones and double block. That means you either have to draw another land and prey your opponent has nothing at all – no burn, no other creature this turn, no Shatter, no nothing – or draw a card that gets you out of it. This deck's core design doesn't have anything that will get you out of it, so your best chance of survival is to counter the Lackey. That is a strong argument for not holding back Force of Will at all.

I find the next situation rather neat because it involves the interactions of two game altering effects: Endless Swarm and Choice of Damnations. There are a few things that need to be noted here. First, there is the type of situation that rapidly grows too complex to fully analyze over the board. I could attempt to consider every possibility, but that is not a realistic option for the players involved. Instead, I will reason out how I would consider the situation if I had a decent but finite chunk of time.

The second thing to note is that I am fully aware that this is probably not going to happen to you. Chances are low that you play either of these decks and this position gets bizarre quickly, but don't feel like there is nothing here for you as a result. First, situations like this one highlight the decision making process when you're faced with new choices. That's important, but to me the best selling point this time is that this position is so much fun! Remember fun? I hope so. It remembers you.

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Dear Zvi Mowshowitz,  
I have a situation I'd like you to analyze:



**Opponent (25 life)**

*in play:*

- 5 Swamp
- 6 Forest
- 1 Island
- 1 Sensei's Divining Top
- 1 Blood Clock
- 1 Thief of Hope

*in hand:*

- 2 Choice of Damnations (fetched with Eerie Processions)
- 1 Sensei's Divining Top (bounced by Blood Clock)
- 1 unknown card

**Me (16 life)**

*in play:*

- 1 Epic Struggle
- 1 Krark-Clan Ironworks
- 1 Swamp
- 1 Plains
- 3 Forest
- 12 1/1 Snake tokens  
(I've played an Endless Swarm)

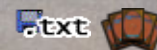
*in hand:*

- 1 Soul Warden (just drawn)
- 1 Epic Struggle
- 1 Death Match
- 3 Forest
- 1 Plains

It's my opponent's precombat main phase. I know he's playing JMS's Thief of Time deck:

**Black Clock v.2.3**

Kamigawa Block Constructed deck



**Main Deck**

60 cards

10 Forest

2 Ghost-Lit Stalker

4 Blood Clock

1 Island	4 Hana Kami	2 Choice of Damnations
11 Swamp	3 Kemuri-Onna	2 Eerie Procession
22 lands	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	1 Hideous Laughter
	4 Thief of Hope	4 Kodama's Reach
	17 creatures	2 Sensei's Divining Top
		2 Soulless Revival
		3 Swallowing Plague
		1 Wear Away
		21 other spells

He plays Choice of Damnations and I lose 1 for Thief of Hope.

He will surely play the other right away.

What's my best choice?

You're going to face Choice of Damnations this turn and then again on your next turn, so you need to plan your response to both of them. You can pay a bunch of life for the first one but that will leave you permanents that you will lose to the second one. Your opponent is at twenty-five, but you have Endless Swarm going along with Epic Struggle so I see no need to be concerned with hitting him for damage in the interim. I see no need to pay life to keep a snake around if you're going to have to lose it next time – and with so many coming each turn, this turn's snakes are going to be surplus when he casts the second Choice of Damnations. Extras are nice, but they are expendable.

The first step is, which permanents need to be kept? Epic Struggle is worth keeping for obvious reasons.

Is anything else?

Blood Clock is going to make you pay two life if you can't return a permanent to your hand, so you'll want to keep a permanent around to return to your hand. A card is better than a token in order to get you an extra snake, so that means you'll want to keep a non-token card, so if you won't have any tokens around to give away you'll have to keep a card for this purpose. Are any Snakes worth keeping? Thief of Hope will attack you for two if you don't keep any of them, so you'll need to keep at least one. If you keep two he can't attack at all, letting you keep both and giving you a buffer.

If you need to get aggressive you can say three and still have all the tools you need, or say two knowing that you'll be losing two life from Blood Clock or Thief of Hope. You can also play it safe with your permanents and say four. If you say three, a Horobi's Whisper could cost you both tokens when you double block and then you would lose two life to Blood Clock while he kept the Thief of Hope. Other than that risk, all you're giving him is a little extra time. His unknown card isn't random due to the Top, but the odds are still against him having any particular card.



It's time to turn things around: If you take a minimalist approach, which choice will he make?

From his perspective, he needs to kill you before he is overwhelmed by Endless Swarm. You are going to get eight Snakes per turn if he doesn't bounce the Blood Clock, seven if he does (but he probably isn't considering this option, and he also likely needs the Blood Clock to re-trigger Thief of Hope), or less if he throws discard into the mix. He might have some chances he doesn't and he can't cast it this turn if he casts both copies of Choice of Damnations. Right now you have twelve, which means you can swing for eleven on your next turn and eighteen on the turn after that. He can't make you lose life twice if it doesn't kill you by the end of his next turn. Right now you're at fifteen, but counting the point from the second Choice of Damnations you're really at fourteen and there's a good chance he can find another arcane spell to put you are at thirteen. In his best-case scenarios he can do a lot of damage, but with no graveyard you're relatively safe.



If the number chosen is four, he can make you lose four life.

At this point, you can safely say any number you can live through when he casts the second Damnation. You don't know your true life total, so you would like to assume that he can do a decent amount of damage to you with Thief of Hope tricks. That lets you say four again, which forces him to either say permanents or try and generate a close to perfect hand. This is no worse than if he had forced you to sacrifice all but four permanents, since you could have chosen four again and would be even better off choosing three.

The question is, can you say five or six in this spot? If you do say six, he will almost certainly make you lose six life and hope he can draw the right cards off the top. That seems like an unnecessary risk to me as there are several ways he can get you to zero. Five is less risky, but he still has realistic outs because he can start with Thief of Hope. Also note that if he has the goods he would undoubtedly make you lose life from the first choice. He doesn't have a third Choice of Damnations in his deck (if he's playing the exact JMS listing), so I'd probably want to play it safe. Being willing to go too low seems like opening a window you don't need to open.

If you choose four, you'll probably end up losing four life from the first Choice of Damnations and having four or five permanents if you say four again on the second one. That leaves you with everything vital to your success at minimal life cost, but you still paid costs that you'd like to avoid. The alternative is to say three. If he says life then this is better than saying four, so let's assume for

now that he makes you go down to three permanents. At this point, casting the second Choice of Damnations at all seems bad for him – he can do more to you next turn, but the question assumed he would cast both. In that case, you obviously say two or three. If you say two, you lose two life from being unable to return a land but that's still only two life lost. That means you can safely say two. You lose a net of two life from Blood Clock but otherwise pay nothing. If he is determined to cast both copies of Choice of Damnations this turn the way Mark Justice used two Demonic Consultations at the same time to get two Dark Rituals in a famous mistake at Worlds '96, the correct answer seems to me to be 'three,' then (unless he says life on the first one) 'two.'

Let's question the assumption that he's casting both copies this turn. Suppose he will (correctly) wait if you go down to almost no permanents. Now what?

You say three, then he attacks for two, uses the Top and probably says go. You can then untap, return Forest, make eight Snakes, replay Forest and pass the turn. If he is smart, he'll continue to wait in the hopes of finding a second Thief of Hope with the Top or other similarly useful stuff. Any creature in his deck will increase the pressure on you when he plays the second Choice of Damnations and he's not going to take much damage here. The problem with waiting a second turn is that he will be facing down enough snakes that you'll be only two turns off of triggering Epic Struggle. That means he is under a ton of pressure to make you sacrifice permanents and you have a lot of life to play with. You can safely say a number like five or six if you need to at this point, and he'll have to make you sacrifice permanents. He needs a miracle off the top to come back, but it's still better than his alternative.

The question for you then becomes whether he has a better shot making you go down to three permanents and waiting to cast the second Choice of Damnations, giving him more time before he runs out of cards but giving you more life points, or paying four life points and going down to four or five permanents right away, giving him a fixed clock and a fixed target. From my point of view, his likely ways to win involve a second Thief of Hope and he would have already cast it (and waited on the second Choice) if it were in the top two cards. The other big danger is that you'll have to face Hideous Laughter. If he starts splicing Hideous Laughter, he could lock you out of the game. For those reasons, I'd want to wrap things up quickly and would say four rather than three but I consider both valid choices. If you know both copies are coming, you should say three.

Unless you hand your opponent more life than you should, you're going to force your opponent to come up with multiple good draws off the top of his deck in order to beat you. When players need multiple cards, you want to try and finish them off quickly and therefore I would want to force him to burn the second Choice of Damnations as soon as possible. I would therefore say four – I know that saying more than four is risky for little gain, but that saying less leads to a scenario that gives my opponent more time than I want him to have. He could make either choice here, either saying permanents and waiting or saying life and casting both, but his previous play indicates he will cast both this turn.

Here's what happened in the game:

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The game went this way:

I chose 9. He chose life and I went down to 6. Then he played the second. I went to 5 and chose 2 and he chose permanents. I kept my Epic Struggle and a Forest to pay for Blood Clock. He swung Thief of Hope at me and I dropped to 3. Then he passed and I returned a Forest to hand, dropped 8 Snakes, drew a card (Kodama's Reach), dropped a land and passed discarding a nonland (Kodama's Reach). He paid life for the Clock, drew and played Sensei's Divining Top and Kemuri-Onna. I dropped to 2 and discarded Soul Warden. He passed. I paid for Blood Clock with my Forest, dropped 7 more Snakes, drew a Cloudpost, re-played the Forest, attacked with 8 Snakes (the non-sickened), blocked 2 and I passed. Again he paid with life and drew a Swallowing Plague, targeted a Snake with X=1, returned Kemuri-Onna to hand and re-played it, and Thief of Hope ended my misery. Did I make the right choices (of damnations)?

Later on I was thinking about this situation and I think I should have chosen 2 and 1. He would choose permanents both times (his best choice). That way I'd keep Epic Struggle and be at 14 life. I would then pay 2 for Blood Clock and put 7 Snakes. He couldn't kill me the next two turns. I lost because I made the wrong choice.

A final note: Is there any evidence that your opponent may have messed this game up?

I believe that there is, although it is possible that his mana requirements and the need to shuffle in order to see more cards with the Top have combined to force his hand. By revealing the existence of the second Choice of Damnations, he is giving you a ton of information and committing himself to a course of action when neither action is required. I would much prefer in his spot to cast the first Choice and hope that you choose a number that is too high, allowing him to then force you into the type of disaster that occurred in the game when the Epic player picked nine.

That's it for this week, and for this year! Have a fun break and at least one happy holiday, and we'll see you in January with new content. In the meantime, have fun on the message boards.

Zvi Mowshowitz

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